The Salt Lake Tribune

FRIDAY March 26, 2004

A cure for power hiccups: Lindon company keeps the juice flowing steadily

By Bob Mims
The Salt Lake Tribune

LINDON -- For Power Innovations International Chief Executive Robert Mount, it's all about the juice.

Sure, the electrical engineer could easily explain the nuances of power, filling a chalkboard with symbols and equations: Now class, here is the nucleus of an atom. These are neutrons, here are protons, positively charged, and then we have these negatively charged particles called electrons . . . .

Instead, Mount keeps it simple. Ask him what Power Innovations does, and he tells you that his company manages, generates and stores electricity for clients who can't afford the hiccups of an over-burdened power system.

Mount knows that whether it is a corporate or private client, the reality is basically the same: When the juice stops flowing from the wall outlet, most transform from sophisticated, 21st century urbanites into neo-troglodytes fumbling in the dark for matches and candles.

Power Innovations International Chief Executive Robert Mount shows off one of his Lindon-based company's products. (Glen Ricks/Power Innovations)

"All of us are so used to flipping a switch and the light comes on, that when the power goes out, all of a sudden it's pandemonium," Mount says. "Power has become the second necessity of life, with air being No. 1."

Anyone with a computer is familiar with UPS, or uninterruptible power supply. It is a unit containing a battery to provide temporary power in the event of an outage. The idea is to gain precious minutes to secure data and power down normally, saving wear-and-tear on sensitive motherboards and attached accessories.

But Mount says the challenge today, with increasingly powerful -- and surge vulnerable -- technology is more than that. Clients, whether a small business or an airport, hospital or even the 2002 Winter Olympics, need power delivered at steady, or "quality" levels.

"We coined the term, 'UPQ,' or uninterruptible power quality," he says. "That's the problem we face right now. . . . The demand for power is exceeding the ability to supply, and the quality, or integrity of the electricity goes downhill."

Through a catalog of UPQ units, from desktop boxes and mid-range, rack-mounted modules to cabinet-sized and mammoth, industrial units filling a wall, Power Innovations has compiled an impressive list of clients.

Some of the $10 million, privately held company's customers include the likes of Disney and the Canadian government, along with Salt Lake City International Airport, Baker-Hughes and Utah's Altiris.

Altiris, engaged in computer systems management, sees Power Innovations as a natural partner.

"We evaluated several competitive options and decided to go with Power Innovations for their breadth of features," says Chris Quarnberg, Altiris's information technology director. "Power Innovations has provided us system protection and a peace of mind."

And then there was the 7-year-old company's proudest achievement: the 2002 Winter Games. "While there were power problems at the Olympics, there were none as far as the equipment attached to what we had there was concerned," Mount boasts.

Lane Beattie, current Salt Lake Chamber president and chief executive, says Power Innovations has much to be proud of. Beattie served as state Olympic officer during the Games.

"We couldn't afford any downtime. With the Olympics, you are allowed one mistake, but that one mistake will brand you forever," he says. "Because we had Power Innovations involved, there were no issues [with power interruptions] at critical areas."

Indeed, Power Innovations is awaiting word on bids to provide electrical backup and management for every venue of the 2004 Summer Games in Athens and the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin.

Those contracts could be awarded any time, leading to rapid employment expansion for the company started by the former Brigham Young University electrical engineering professor. Employing a couple of dozen people today, Power Innovations could find itself hiring dozens more.

Mount cannot be as candid about his company's work for Homeland Security and the military, except to say much of the work involves keeping various scanning devices running at peak ability.

Also carefully guarded is Power Innovations' stake in the future -- developing alternative power from renewable resources. Purposely vague, Mount hints his company is near a breakthrough involving thermal electrical generation.

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